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ABSTRACT

Minimum competency testing in American schools was examined for its effects on low-achieving high school students. Interviews with educators and results of a survey of more than 700 high school students were used. In the view of many educators, minimum competency tests were so rudimentary as to not be much of a barrier to completing school. Most of the students considered competency testing policies to be beneficial. However, those who failed such tests initially were more likely to be doubtful about their ability to earn a diploma. About half of the students believed that such testing caused some students to drop out. Statistical information is presented in 12 tables, and the National Survey of Student Experiences with Graduation Tests and the master question list for educator interviews are appended. (SLD)

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STANDARDS AND SCHOOL DROPOUTS:

A NATIONAL STUDY OF THE MINIMUM COMPETENCY TEST

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REVISED DRAFT - March 1988

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Abstract

This article reports findings from a study of minimum competency testing in American secondary schools. The analysis focuses on tests that students must pass before they receive the high school diploma, a practice reported in about half of the 50 states. We explore the effects of these tests on low achieving high school students. A particular concern is the possibility that test-failure may reduce academic aspirations and thereby contribute to decisions to drop out of school.

The study is based on series of in-depth interviews with educators in selected states, and on data collected face-to-face with more than 700 high school students. In one category of findings, the reports of test coordinators, school principals, and school counselors provide consistent echoes of a conventional wisdom that has enveloped high school exit exams: the belief that required competency tests are now so rudimentary that they cannot present much of a barrier to school completion. But at the same time, these educators report with uniform consistency that they do not have specific data on our question.

In a contrasting vein of findings, the students report experiences that pose a credible challenge to this conventional wisdom. Despite a strong majority of students claiming competency testing policies to be beneficial for a variety of reasons, we found that initial test failers are significantly more likely to express doubts about their chances of completing the diploma. In a fully specified general model which predicts self-reported chances of finishing high school, failing all or part of a required exit test is a robust independent contributor to doubts about the prospects of graduating.

Implications of our findings for research, policy making, and educational practice are explored.

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Introduction

This article reports findings from a study of minimum competency testing in American secondary schools. The analysis focuses on tests that students must pass before they receive the high school diploma, a practice reported in about half of the 50 states. We explore the effects of these tests on low achieving high school students. A particular concern is the possibility that test-failure may reduce academic aspirations, even to the point where students leave school without graduating.

If the ebb of scholarly citations is any indication, much of the controversy surrounding these tests at the end of the 1970s seems to have subsided. Our renewed interest in the gatekeeping test follows the more recent and widespread legislation of additional requirements for high school diplomas -- policies huddled under the umbrella of "Excellence"reforms. There is substantial interest in the impact of these seemingly stricter standards on low-performing students, including whether these policies will push some youngsters out of school.

But analyses of the consequences of this reform agenda are

likely to be preliminary or intermediate in nature as of the 1987-88 school year. Most of the recent standards-setting reforms are either just beginning to apply to current high schoolers or have not yet been implemented. And many that caused a stir have not yet been funded. Therefore assessments of their full effects will have to wait. In contast, the competency test offers an (arguable) example of a standards-setting policy that has been in place long enough to display some of its more stable and long term impacts.

Our study was based on series of in-depth interviews with educators in selected states, and on data collected face-to-face with more than 700 high school students. In one category of findings, the reports of test coordinators, school principals, and school counselors provide consistent echoes of a conventional wisdom that has enveloped high school exit exams: the belief that required competency tests are now so rudimentary that they cannot present much of a barrier to school completion. But at the same time, these educators reported with uniform consistency that they did not have specific data on our question. We attempt to bridge this information gap with this study.

In a contrasting set of findings, the students report experiences that pose a credible challenge to this conventional wisdom. Despite a strong majority of students claiming competency testing policies to be beneficial for a variety of reasons, we found that initial test failers are significantly more likely to express doubts about their chances of finishing

high school. In a fully specified general model which predicts self-reported chances of finishing high school, failing all or part of a required exit test is a robust independent contributor to doubts about the prospects of graduating.

The discussion begins by briefly reexamining the competency test and its place in the lexicon of standards-raising reforms. We argue that there is a substantial gap in current knowledge regarding competency testing practices. This shortfall allows the possibility that the exit test serves as a real barrier to school continuation, contrary to the tone of both the literature and popular belief. We then introduce the study, including our choice of states, schools, and students for our samples. And the core of the presentation reports our analysis of the resulting responses of nearly 60 educators and 736 students probed by interview and researcher-administered surveys.

Can the Competency Test Discourage Students?

The competency testing movement in the United States swelled in the latter 1970s, when more than 40 states introduced some sort of mandated statewide testing (Goertz, 1986). About 25 states included gate-keeping provisions in these policies, including a test or series of tests that must be passed before a diploma could be awarded. As our study began in 1986, 9 states reported a graduation test requirement that had affected their graduating classes since at least 1983, indicating at least 4 years of experience with their exit tests.

Reported Studies of Graduation Tests

A quest for understanding the implications of these tests fueled an outpouring of analyses between 1978 and 1982. The first concerned their legal defensibility. Early diploma denials and high levels of test failure in Florida set the stage for a celebrated legal challenge (Debra P. vs Turlington). This case established that diploma denials are defensible if the tests address material that is actually represented in the curriculum (Trachtenberg, 1980).

A second and central theme in competency test scholarship embraced the emerging performance statistics, and particularly the low pass rates of minority children (Fisher, 1978; Serow, 1980). But concerns for test fairness seemed to quiet as pass rate statistics in Florida and elsewhere showed marked improvement in the early years of implementation, and as very high "ultimate" pass rates were publicized. The mutual adaptations of tests and curricula on the one hand, and educators and legislators on the other, probably contributed to the decline of academic interest in graduation tests. Besides, the 1983 and subsequent critiques of the condition of the nation's schools had delivered a wholly new agenda to the policy research community.

Florida's early experiences augured a summary conclusion of test-interested scholars: that the competency test was legislated as a lion but implemented as a lamb. The reform that rode to prominence on the message that schools "would finally mean business" quickly cooled-out (Jaeger, 1982). The device

appeared to have settled into wherever it is that yesterday's fashionable reform ideas go to live out their lives.

The diploma-sanctioning tests remained, but cut-off scores were lowered apparently in response to politically unacceptable pass rates, and the tests became depressingly basic in their search for curricular common denominators (Glass, 1987; Haney & Maddaus, 1982). The claim that the test had been reduced to a political selling-point was supported by reports that ultimate failure rates were typically in the neighborhood of one percent (Serow, 1984a). The capacity of the test to discourage failers was suggested as a potential problem by analysts (e.g. Blau, 1980; Glass, 1978), but this was not examined empirically.

Before launching the present study, our initial conversations with test administrators and educators were consonant with the tone of the literature. We received a stable conventional wisdom regarding the marginal threat these tests posed to low achievers. How could they push kids out of school if the tests are so easy, or if so few are denied diplomas because of failure? A handful of venturesome respondents admitted that some kids might be dropping out because of the test, but that they had no way of knowing this. It was only when we explored some underlying dynamics of the testing process that we began to frame the question of testing and dropouts somewhat differently.

We discovered two interacting information problems, individual level test performance data and school dropout data, which suggested to us the need for additional study on the connections

between exit tests and school leaving. Our reasoning was simple: Youngsters usually take all or part of the competency test in the 9th or 10th grade. Typically 60 to 80 percent pass on the first attempt. Failers are usually offered some form of remediation and regular chances to try again. Most re-takers eventually succeed. Within this flow of events, which seems to turn few heads among educators, an important dynamic is obscured -- namely the fate of first-time or subsequent test failers. We have yet to encounter a school district or state that tracks or reports the longitudinal histories test failers. How many in this group remain in school long enough to attempt another competency test? How many initial failers, as opposed to test re-takers, ultimately pass? In other words, do ultimate pass rates of 99 percent reflect the resuscitation of early failers (a belief implied by the conventional wisdom), or rather does it reveal their disappearance from the test-taking population? Since so many youngsters generally leave high school between the 9th grade and the time they would have graduated, this is an important question. Finally, does initial failure on a required graduation test have any influence on a youngster's decision to drop out? We turn now to our attempts to sort out these questions.

A Study of Exit Tests and School Continuation

As we designed our empirical work, the state of knowledge on the questions just described was very thin. This problem lay in school district and state education data systems largely

inattentive to the details of exit test performance, and in an endemic absence of useful or believable school dropout data (Hammack, 1986; Catterall, 1987). Our project's early inquiries indicated that we should not hope to obtain formal reports from schools, districts, or states that could shed useful light on test-related dropout questions. We decided instead to probe educators and students themselves about their experiences with these tests and their possible linkages to school-leaving behavior. In a nutshell, our design was to first ask educators, and particularly those in contact with potential and actual dropouts, about their views regarding the influence of required graduation tests. Second, we would ask a large sample of students about their experiences with these tests, and link these responses to an array of related questions concerning each individual's school performance, schooling context, aspirations, and family background.

The Sample

Table 1 provides information about the respondents enlisted for the study. We began by identifying all states reporting four or more years of experience with a required graduation test (N=10). This qualifying condition would yield school systems where the test had been around long enough to accumulate the trappings of experience. Appendix A lists the 10 candidate states along with selected data about their tests and high school graduation rates. We canvassed state testing directors in each of these states and found that only nine states remained

qualified: one state, Vermont, had repealed (flunked?) its graduation test. We obtained complete interview records from six of the state testing directors.

We chose four states from this list for more intensive study, the two states with the lowest reported graduation rates (California and New York), and the two with the highest graduation rates (Virginia and Utah). We did not anticipate a dramatic source of variation using this selection criterion. But we desired sample schools from **milieus** having quite visible dropout problems as well as schools where general concerns for dropouts were perhaps more subdued.

Within each of the four states, we randomly selected three school districts for the first round of interviews, after stratifying candidate districts into urban, suburban, and rural classifications. Within each selected district, we conducted interviews with the district test coordinator and at least two high school principals and two school counselors. The distribution of complete interview records by type of district and by type of state is shown in Table 1.

The student sample was generated by securing agreements for follow-up visits from many of the principals and counselors interviewed. We chose to focus on ninth and eleventh graders for this phase. Ninth graders would have early experiences with graduation tests in many of these schools, and eleventh graders would be more seasoned by their experiences, including failure and re-testing for some.

In each of the eight schools ultimately visited across the four states, we selected and visited a minimum of five classes. We surveyed at least one remedial class in each high school, where possible a class that was assembled to help students prepare to re-take the minimum competency test. We also asked for one college preparatory class at each school. The remaining classes represented a full range of ninth and eleventh grade topics and students -- English, machine shop, history, home economics, mathematics, and others. After learning of the types of classes we wanted to survey, the school principals helped us to select classes and arrange visit schedules. For these classroom visits, we secured enough time to explain the study, administer a questionnaire to students, and conduct a follow-up discussion of the project.

We both intentionally and unintentionally tipped our student data collection efforts toward the urban schools in this study. By design, we wished to amply represent large city schools because dropping out is known to be much more common in the nation' urban centers (Hammack, 1986). So three of the eight schools visited were in this group. We also found that class sizes in our sample's urban schools were larger than those in suburban or rural schools. So even more students in our final sample hailed from larger cities.

Table 10 includes some descriptors in column (1) which categorize the attained student sample (N=736). Age and grade statistics reveal a rough balance between ninth and eleventh

graders. Self-reported class grades averaged a B-minus level, with substantial variance. Black students constituted 16 percent of the sample, slightly more than the overall representation of blacks in the nation's schools. Hispanic youngsters accounted for 12 percent, almost half again more than their national enrollment shares. Asians constituted about 8 percent of those studied. Just over a third of the students reported being in a general track, about one-tenth in a vocational track, and more than half in a college preparatory track. Five percent of the students reported having failed all or part of a graduation-required test and ten percent reported passing the test on a second or later administration. Fourteen percent indicated that there was at least some possibility that they might leave school without graduating.

Instrumentation and Procedures

Appendix B contains the protocol used for interviews with test coordinators, principals, and school counselors. For this analysis, we will concentrate on questions and responses concerning:

A) success and failure patterns on the test (Questions 5 and 6),

B) the general impact of the tests on pupils (Question 9), and

C) specific concerns for low achievers, including the possibility that a graduation test may induce dropping out (Questions 11 and 12).

The interviews were conducted by telephone in May and June of 1987 and typically required 45 minutes. Notes and direct quotations from the interviews were transcribed to disk, and a printed summary of all 58 interviews contains 143 single-spaced pages. Classification and organization of interview responses was facilitated by the use of a high-powered text-processing program (ESP, Software Resources Inc.) on the IBM PC/AT.

The student survey instrument is shown in Appendix C. This instrument was designed especially for this study, but reproduces several student background and performance items from the national High School and Beyond Survey (United States Department of Education, 1984). We also replicate certain student opinion items from a previous study of competency tests by Haertel, Ferrara, Korpi, and Prescott (1984). For this study, we report on several classifications of student opinions regarding graduation tests. But we focus especially on student expressions of their chances of graduating from high school. As described in detail below, we construct and estimate a predictive model for this self-assessment that includes a full range of constructs thought to influence school continuation and attrition. Data for estimation of these constructs were obtained from the survey.

As sketched above, the student survey was administered in classrooms under standard conditions by project staff, either the project director or the primary research assistant. Students were informed that the study was designed to fill an important gap in research on competency tests -- our lack of knowledge

concerning student views and experiences with such policies. The students were not told whether or not they should already have taken such a test, nor whether their schools even required one. We wanted to know how the students themselves would answer such questions.

The direct administration of the survey seems to have paid off in two important ways. First, the data files are relatively complete for the 736 cases, with the exception of information simply unknown to individual students. Second, we asked for written responses to three important open questions on the survey and the students were very cooperative. For example, when we asked for explanations of why they believed competency testing for graduation was either a good or bad idea (Item 15), more than 600 of the 736 students wrote something. We had similar luck with written responses from those indicating a possibility of leaving school (Item 12), and again on a general question probing the nature of any changed standards for the diploma in their schools (Item 27). Perhaps the attraction to students of working with the survey instead of returning to regular school work proved to be an ally of the project.

Simple Answers to Simple Questions -- How Do the Tests Work?

Our 58 educator interviews were held with those in favorable positions to be aware of the impact of required graduation tests on high schoolers. One group included the administrators and coordinators of the tests who might report on or direct us to any

data generated by their systems. Another included high school principals and counselors who must deal directly with large numbers of students and parents on questions of satisfactory progress toward the diploma.

The students were also asked direct questions of the impact of these tests on themselves and their peers, including whether they thought the tests contributed to dropout decisions.

Do Tests Prompt Exit Decisions?

In response to the direct question of test-induced school leaving, we heard a loud, but qualified "no" from our educators. Only 5 of 58 respondents conveyed that the tests played a role in student attrition, but doubters and believers alike admitted that they had no data that could support a definitive answer. The modal reply was that failure to keep up with other more fundamental requirements for the diploma was the usual reason for leaving school. One principal stated:

> By the time a kid reaches the point of failing a competency test, so many other things have built-up inside him or her. If they still haven't passed a few sections of the test by their junior year, they are also short 15 credits out of 24. The realization of how far behind they are in their courses leads them out the door.

Others put their doubts about the test's role in dropping out more succinctly:

> It's just not that tough an exam. The students that are dropping out of school have more pressing problems.

> No, tests do not push kids out here and I would speculate they wouldn't in other places either. Dropouts tend to be dropouts back in the 5th grade.

One counselor issued a harbinger of studies to come by refering to a theme that inspired our research in the first place:

> No, the increased state requirements for graduation constitute a bigger problem than the competency test.

And the negligible substance of the test was described in words like these:

> In general, students who merely attend school will pass the test, even if they are low in skills. Most everything on the test is at the 8th grade level, which is the level of most newspapers. The test is not designed to exclude people.

An overall characterization emerged in responses to the direct question of test-induced dropping out. The **complexity** of the dropout problem (well identified in accumulated research), the **low standard** pegged by the tests, and the **fundamental deficits** exhibited by test failers all provided key rationales for negative leanings on this question.

The few dissenting respondents also based their beliefs on instincts that were unencumbered by data. For example, a district test coordinator in a large urban district offered this appraisal:

> I'm too removed to know. But being in the business for 25 years, I would say yes. It only makes sense that the test would influence dropout behavior, but to what extent I don't know.

A high school principal in the same district concurred:

> Although I don't actually have any data, deep in my heart of hearts I feel that it does [cause dropping out]. I look at the first and last test administrations for a cohort: in a class of 800 9th graders, 40 percent pass the MCT. By the end of the 12th grade, there may be only 375 students passing the test and remaining in school.

This last statement was as close as we ever came to a report of genuine longitudinal test-taker data. It reflects the same reasoning outlined in the introduction to this discussion.

One suburban school principal was certain that the state's math-laden competency test served effectively to pick-off otherwise promotable students:

> Some kids have valuable verbal skills and so would make good salesmen and the like, but they will never meet the state's minimum math requirement. Our test represents a narrow definition of excellence for contemporary society. Math will always be Greek to some, and we lose these kids with these tests.

And another from the same state was equally convinced:

> Yes, I do believe the tests push kids out. If the student knows he or she can't pass the test and it's the only block to graduation, they drop out. They need so much encouragement to pass the test.

We cannot provide a definitive answer the the question of test induced dropping out from our interviews, but the patterns in the answers are clear. There was a strong balance of sentiment that the tests are not a material factor in dropout decisions. A few respondents felt differently. As an

incidental observation, those who tagged the graduation test as a probable factor were confined to the two states with low graduation rates (New York and California). All but one of these respondents was from an urban school or district. The implications of this grouping are not clear to us at this point in our consideration of the data.

Students were asked two questions directly related to exit testing and dropouts. Table 2 displays responses to the simple question, "Do you agree that tests required for graduation may discourage some students from staying in high school? Overall, just over half of our 736 students reported agreement with this statement, about 20 percent said no, and the rest were not sure. Low achievers and general track students were the most in agreement, more than 60 percent answering yes. And almost two thirds of low achievers who had not yet taken all or part of a competency test indicated belief that the tests have discouraging effects on school continuation. Distributions of responses for other classifications of students are also shown in the table.

(Table 2 About Here)

Table 3 shows student responses to the same question, in this case by state graduation rate and by community type. Overall, students in our two high graduation rate states (Utah and Virginia) were more likely to agree with the push-out question

than students in the two low graduation states (California and New York). This stands in contrast to our professional educators, where convictions about the test's capacity to cause dropping out were concentrated in the low graduation rate states. There was no consistent pattern of responses across community types on this question.

(Table 3 About Here)

We also asked students a related question. "Are you personally aware of someone who failed a graduation test and later left school because of this?" Responses to this query are displayed in Table 4. Only 14 percent said yes to this question, with nearly 70 percent replying negatively. The propensity to report awareness of a test-related dropout was definitely responsive to indicators of academic orientation and success in school. Nearly twice as many students who reported low grades or repeating a grade thought they knew a test casualty. Nearly three times as many general track as college preparatory youngsters expressed the same. And more than one in five of those who expressed some chance that they themselves would not finish school claimed to know a test push-out. If we accept the proposition that students may in fact know test casualties, the likely differential exposure of students in these classifications to potential and actual dropouts suggests that these patterns are plausible.

(Table 4 About Here)

Overall, students are much more affirmative on the question of test-related dropping out than the educators we asked. If we reduce the comparison to simple numbers, between 8 and 9 percent of the educators say yes to the question. More than half the students concur with this professional minority. And somewhere between 8 and 24 percent of students, depending on how they are grouped, say they know someone who left school because of failing a required test.

Indirect Evidence of School-Leaving Effects

In addition to the point-blank question, we asked both our educators and students to convey their views about student reactions to required graduation testing. The reactions of interest were plausibly connected to the tendency of tests to discourage school completion. One question of school personnel asked about the general attitude of low achievers toward the testing program. Another queried how students responded to re-testing when all or part of a competency test was failed. We also aimed a direct question to students asking them to appraise these tests; this was accompanied by an open-response item asking for reasons why students believed exit tests to be a good or bad idea.

Educator Views

In general, the responses of school personnel to these questions were consonant with their opinions expressed on the

direct question, with a few more respondents than in the first instance identifying particular difficulties faced by test failers. About a fourth of the educators expressed concerns of one sort or another for low achievers. But many saw the test as a boon to the struggling student. The competency test is widely regarded as a means of helping to identify learning shortfalls and to prescribe remediation. A rural school principal reported:

> The lower students don't slip through the cracks as easily due to this test, and it provides for more accountability.

And a counselor cited outright eagerness on the part of students to take successive administrations of her school's competency test:

> Do they shun re-tests? It's more like, "When can I take it again?"

Another counselor reported quite different reactions from his students on the subject of attitudes toward retesting. This response suggests that there may be delicate issues concerning how information about test results is communicated and treated.

> Yes we do see hesitancy to re-take the tests. There is a great social stigma for those who do not pass the first time. We announce and post who needs to retake the test.

Apparently this respondent's school uses the test as substantial and negative form of reinforcement. While this practice may drive more students into the ranks of the passing,

this would appear from the words of the counselor to occur at a severe price to the failers.

Our questions of student reactions to the test, particularly the views of students who failed all or part, brought forth additional speculation on the relation of the test to school completion. Two of our test coordinators offered these comments:

> There are a lot of potential dropouts as a result of these tests due to the devastation of self-esteem; correct and prompt remediation is crucial.
>
> The low achievers don't pass the test and they take a lot of time. I wonder about those who silently drop out after not passing it the first time. I'm not saying that the test itself is the reason that these kids drop out, but we can't find those who drop out after the first time they take the test and test failure is one thing they have in common. I'd like to see a longitudinal study following these kids.

The uncertainty of educators concerning the later fate of test failers -- a data problem cited above -- repeatedly flavored our responses. The dissapearance of test failers was noted by one urban school principal as a good reason to extend the time between test administrations. The rationale, expressed as follows by the respondent, was that testing personnel would not have to bother with so many re-tests if they simply wait the students out:

> The failures are often the transient students. We therefore hold-off on re-testing since many of the students who failed some part of the test will move away. That's why I postpone re-testing until their senior year.

The policy implied by this response was clearly an exception across our sample in regard to its implied sensitivity to the possible needs of test failers. Young high schoolers who wish to correct deficiencies identified by this school's tests, and in turn to receive some recognition for having done so, must delay their gratification dramatically.

Student Views

Student-expressed opinions of competency testing for graduation are described by entries in Tables 5 and 6. The first contains responses to the straightforward question, "If you will have to pass a particular test in order to graduate, do you think that this is a good idea?" Our responses were very much like those obtained by Haertel et al. (1984) in a more limited study confined to San Francisco Bay area schools: students in both studies largely approved of the practice, in our case by nearly three to one. Interestingly, Black, Hispanic, and Asian students were even more positive about the tests than white students. The least positive group was those students reporting having failed all or part of a competency test without subsequently passing. But even half of these students agreed that the test was a good idea. Students reporting no experience with the tests were nearly as skeptical as the test failers, which is to say that they approved of the concept of required graduation testing by only 2 to 1.

(Table 5 About Here)

We asked students who had favorable or unfavorable views of the competency testing idea in general to explain why, in an open questionnaire item. More than 600 of the 736 wrote something, providing us with a rich collection of original (and sometimes unprintable) expressions. We coded these by themes and present the results in Table 6. Consistent with the simple appraisal item, about twice as many written reactions were positive as negative.

(Table 6 About Here)

Ensuring that kids have learned something was the leading response and was expressed by more than 21 percent of the students as an important rationale for the test. This plays back a central argument offered by legislators as the tests were originally debated. As one student put it:

> Before the test, people could graduate without knowing anything!

The test's remediation function, claimed by our educators as an important purpose, was also a leading student response. Nearly 19 percent felt that the tests identified pupil strengths and weaknesses. One student was quite succinct:

Because you know where you stand.

We also included a choice item on the student questionnaire asking, "If a student fails all or part of a graduation test, is he likely to get needed help on the next try?" The responses to this item are shown in Tables 7 and 8, broken down by a variety of student groupings.

(Tables 7 and 8 About Here)

Overall, just over half agreed that students would receive needed help for another attempt at the test. This varied little by reported class grades, and minority youngsters were more positive than whites on this question. Fifty-four percent of test failers agreed that adequate help would be provided, but nearly a third of test failers said "no" to this question, the largest share reporting this. The students who failed the test and then passed on a later try were the most positive on this question -- 63 percent "yes" and only 9 percent "no". Educators in our interviews generally touted their test-related remediation systems as effective and prompt. Reservations were voiced in two areas: that state mandated remediation is not accompanyed by resource allocations, and that many students do not avail themselves of remediation offerings once they fail a test.

Between a fourth and a third of our students wrote negative views regarding the graduation test idea on our instrument. These are also catalogued in Table 6. Many youngsters felt that putting up with 12 years of school should be more than enough to

earn a diploma. One in eight students raised an additional reservation favored by the testing and measurement profession, namely that the tests may not be good measures of "knowledge." Again in tune with the findings of Haertel and his colleagues (1984), very few students sympathized with a central academic perspective on the tests, that they might be unfair to minority youngsters (Serow, 1984a). About one percent expressed this to us, and the ratio did not vary appreciably across students from differing racial or ethnic groups.

None of the students came out and said that the tests were a bad idea because they caused dropouts, but two touched on closely related ideas:

> These tests cause elitist and snobbish attitudes, which cause resentment and negative self-esteem.
>
> We need these tests because we don't want stupid -----s crowding the school if there [sic] not going to do any work!

The first student touched on an important issue in dropout analyses -- student self esteem. And the second volunteered an explicit selecting function ascribed to the competency test.

Interviews and Survey Questions -- Summing-Up

The responses presented thus far present a broad based characterization of graduation tests and their potential links to student dropout decisions. The portrait appears in our view to be somewhat more critical than the conventional wisdom described

in our introduction would have us believe. Drawing on a large number of educators and clients who are in about as good a position as any to sense what is going on, we hear that the graduation tests do present a sizeable hurdle for some students and that schools and systems are not unfailingly responsive to the needs of test failers. But the questions of how much of a hurdle, and how lacking or providing in responsiveness cannot be judged with any accuracy on the basis of the data presented. We attempt to be more precise regarding the possible size of the testing obstacle in a final examination of the data -- a model of student convictions that they will or will not finish school.

Students on Their Chances of Graduating: A Model

A meaningful analysis of the role of the graduation test in school continuation decisions would incorporate graduation test performance, and particularly test failing, as a variable in a longitudinal study of school completion and attrition. While many longitudinal examinations of school leavers versus stayers have been reported recently, none has considered exit test performance as a contributing factor.

Our study did not track individual students over time; so we cannot offer an optimal remedy for this deficiency. But we did ask students to describe their chances of finishing high school (or dropping out) on our survey. More than 100 of our 734 subjects indicated that there was some chance of their not finishing, from slight to certain. We also asked students how they did on their school's graduation test, if taken. Responses

to this question are displayed in Table 9. Five percent of our sample had failed the test, and another ten percent had failed and subsequently passed it.

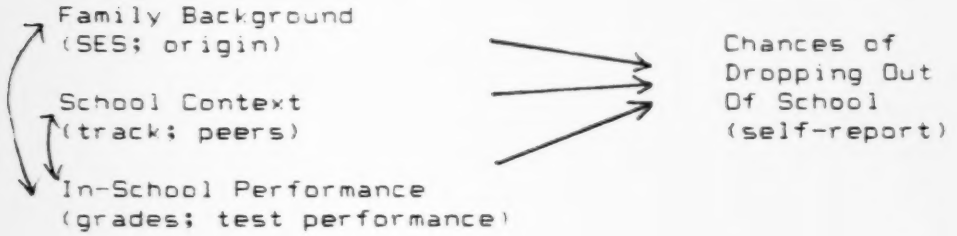
(Table 9 About Here)

Since studies have shown that student-expressed chances of dropping out are significantly related to later school-leaving, we tested a predictive model of this student assessment. The point is not that those who express doubts about finishing always drop out, but that they appear to be much more likely to do so than students who say they will certainly graduate (Eckstrom, Goerth, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; Stern, Catterall, Alhadeff, & Ash, 1986).

We modeled for student responses to a question regarding their chances of graduating and dropping out with direct reference to similar research models of the dropout decision itself. We attend to three main groups of constructs well-established in the literature as predictive of dropping out of school shown in the following model: (Rumberger, 1986; Ekstrom et al., 1986):

(See next page.)

Basic Model of Self-Reported Dropout Likelihood



We augment a standard model of longitudinal dropout research by including graduation test failure as an in-school performance variable. We also include in our analysis interactions between failing the test and selected variables, since the compounding of test failure and other factors associated with low completion rates may exert important independent influences.

All variables in our model are shown in Table 11. Some are reasonably self-explanatory. Most were derived from student self-reports on our instrument; some context data were provided by school officials. Clarifications are offered here:

SES: socioeconomic status crudely estimated by reported father's education level;

ENROLLMENT: enrollment total at the student's high school;

TRACK: student's school program scaled from academic (1) to non-academic (3);

DROPOUT PEERS: a crude indication that the student was located in a peer culture that included dropouts, gauged as a binary variable from the student's response to the question of being aware of anyone who had left school because of failing a competency test;

REPEAT: a binary variable coded (1) if the student claimed to have repeated a grade;

GRADES: grade point average on a nine point scale, (9) for the lowest grades;

FAILED: a binary variable for having failed a competency test.

FAILED, THEN PASSED: a binary variable indicating this pattern of results on the competency test.

Interaction terms: 4 variables which test the effects of combined conditions -- failing the graduation test AND in turn having low grades, being Black, being Hispanic, or having repeated a grade.

Regression Results

Table 11 reports the results of two regressions, one using the entire student sample (N=736) and one using only the students in this larger sample who expressed awareness of having taken a competency test (N=265). Our results are very similar for the two groups.

The starred t-statistics in the table indicate significantly non-zero coefficients for several of the predictor variables in the models. Similar to findings in school dropout studies, having poor class grades is highly associated with student doubts about finishing school in our sample. Also consonant with accumulated school dropout research, student family socioeconomic status is a strong negative contributor to these doubts. In the larger sample, participating in a less academic track, having dropout peers, and having repeated a grade also stand out as significant, with intuitively plausible coefficient signs. These observations in the estimated model are quite consistent with longitudinal dropout studies. Where previous studies have

found associations with later school attrition, we find associations with expressing doubts about finishing among those still in school.

When we focus on our contribution to the standard model, the inclusion of graduation test performance, the results exceed what we expected. The contribution of graduation test failure to doubts about finishing school in our sample is unambiguous and strong. In the full sample, the influence of test performance is more convincingly non-zero than that of all other variables except class grades. In the more restricted test-experienced student sample, having failed the test ranks as the most significant contributor to the possibility of dropping out.

In addition to these important tests of null hypotheses, the absolute magnitudes of the coefficients for test-failure in the two regressions add meaning to these results. The estimated coefficients (0.889 and 0.913) imply that failing a graduation test, holding other factors constant, is accompanied by nearly a **one unit increase** on the reported scale of perceived chances of dropping out. This amounts to changing from certainty about finishing school to reporting that it is only probable, or a similar change across the remaining categories describing the chances of school completion: from probably to maybe, from maybe to probably not, or from probably not to definitely not. To illustrate the strength of this, the coefficient of the TRACK variable suggests that the difference between being in the College Prep versus the General track (two units on this scale)

is associated with only a 0.1 unit difference in the reported chances of dropping out of school, again other factors being equal. In comparison to other predictors, failing the test seems to stand out markedly in its importance.

Interestingly, the students who failed but subsequently passed the test show no influence of this turnabout on their confidence in finishing school. The coefficient of this binary variable is slightly positive and non-significant.

The interaction terms suggest additional but limited insights to the data. First, the interaction of failing the test and being Hispanic is significantly and positively related to doubts about completing the diploma. In contrast, the interaction between test failure and Black family origin is non-significant. Black students in our sample were more likely than others to express confidence about finishing school. Perhaps surprisingly, the interaction between failing the test and having poor grades shows a negative, or counter-intuitive sign. This seems to result from the fact that few of those students reporting the very lowest grades also reported being test failers.

The overall model appears to pass muster. As a crude linear model of a self-reported human attitude, an R-squared in the 0.26 range is at least acceptable. When we consider the various errors introduced in the measurement of variables due to the self-reporting by subjects, along with the weakness of the measures used for two of its constructs, SES and DROPOUT PEERS,

we are further satisfied with the results. And a rough comparison of columns (2) and (3) in Table 10, where sub-samples with and without missing data are compared on critical variables, shows that missing data did not seem to constitute a substantial problem for our estimates.

Interpreting the Estimated Model

A central interpretation of this analysis is that failing the required graduation test is a potential contributor to questions that students raise about whether they will graduate from high school. And since such expressed doubts have shown to be associated with subsequent school leaving, our finding suggests that this potential power of the test needs to be considered as schools administer their exams, report their results, and proceed with the education of test failers.

The conceptual foundation and structure of the model allow such interpretations of our findings, even if they must be tentative. A reasonable case can be made that some important causal relations had been at work for our subjects. While we obtained our student data in a cross-sectional format through student reports, the behaviors and performances cited by students had an implicit temporal ordering. This structure lends credence to assertions that being discouraged about finishing school may have resulted from some of what was reported to us.

We focused on current student expressions of the likelihood of their finishing or dropping out of school. On such expressions we trained family background variables (long pre-existing

conditions), school context variables (stable over time, at least in the near term), and several other past events -- cumulative grades since grade 7, early repeat of a grade, and competency test performance. The theoretical links between these conditions or performances and a child's belief that he or she will finish high school are reasonable and straightforward. A fundamental behaviorist interpretation would suggest that positive family press for traditional school values, positive peer culture, and formal indications of success in school would support individual convictions that the diploma was likely or certain. Failing the graduation test appears to undermine such a conviction.

Additional Discussion

There are two central themes in what we report above. One is that educators labor under the belief that the tests they require for high school completion are largely meaningless and innocuous. In this view, the graduation test is at worst a simplistic exercise, threatening no one and consuming unfortunate amounts of student and teacher time. At best, the test is a way to identify youngsters early on who are going to need assistance with basic academic work in high school. To this appraisal we might add that the test may serve to satisfy political demands that schools set minimum standards for the high school diploma, apart from the substance of the hurdle.

A second theme of our findings challenges this becalmed

portrayal of the competency testing world. One contrast appears in the direct words and responses of students, not surprisingly. After all, when asked what they think of most any school activity, a representative sampling of high schoolers is bound to issue a stock of criticisms. But there appeared to be more than obligatory grousing in what students had to say about their competency tests.

Our students were generally positive on the idea of graduation testing generally, but they were much more suspicious than educators on the capacity of the tests to induce school-leaving. Some cited the tendency of a competency test failure to undermine self-esteem. Others stated quite off-handedly that the tests served to flush out unwanted peers. About half the students responded "yes" to the simple question of whether required graduation testing results in some students dropping out of school.

Our estimated model of student appraisals of their chances of dropping out of school provides even stronger currents which run counter to the educators' conventional wisdom regarding exit tests. We found a robust independent association between competency test failure and reduced beliefs that one would finish school. This association was within a controlled model that included measures of other factors we would believe to lead to such doubts. This means that beyond school grades, family education level, and even having repeated a grade in the early years (predictors of dropout all), failing the graduation test

can substantially undermine one's perceived grasp of the diploma.

Future Research Implications. At a minimum our results have implications for future research. The first is that longitudinal studies of educational aspirations or attrition decisions by high schoolers might profitably attend to student status on required competency tests. The power of this variable in our model indicates that models of individual dropout decisions should include this variable for further examination.

Our results also suggest directions for institutional-level research on school dropouts. The construct of institutional responsiveness to the potential dropout was described by Mc Dill, Natriello, and Pallas (1986) as a critical focus for future research on the school dropout. Whatever the essential components of institutional responsiveness prove to be, our work yields a good candidate for inclusion -- the responsiveness of schools to test failers. Research in this area should examine how graduation test failers are treated through formal and informal school policies. Readers may recall one educator response above that was indicative of a school's flagrant mistreatment of test failers though public humiliation. Although this is far from the norm exposed in our data, it suggests the need for closer professional attention to the test failer -- if only in the interests of keeping him or her in school so that deficiencies can be addressed at all.

Dropout Prevention Implications. Our results may also interest educators who desire to identify students for dropout

prevention activities. While a number of candidate flags for this purpose have found acceptance and are represented by our model, the inclusion of a competency test performance statistic is novel. The MCT has not been studied in this context. Of particular interest is the independence of class grades and test performance in our model. Our work suggests a classification of potential school leavers that common early identification schemes might overlook.

The Invisibility of School Dropouts to Educators. Some broader implications occur to us as we complete our first passes through the project's data. These concern the general invisibility of conditions surrounding dropping out of school both to educators and to many students. A very strong majority of principals and counselors in our study denied the likelihood and even the possibility of test-related school attrition. About half the students responded "no" or "not sure" when asked directly about this. Yet some students reported seeing such effects clearly, and a few educators expressed sympathetic instincts. And our findings, particularly the results of the estimation of our model, suggest that the phenomenon exists in more than a trace magnitude. The confluence of these two themes suggests that few in the system are either positioned to observe such effects, or inclined to dig for awareness of them.

The problem of invisibility is in part caused by the lack of data discussed above. It is also surely aggravated by the simple fact that school dropouts are not dropouts until they leave, and

we would not expect anyone in the schools to systematically piece individual stories together once students have departed. But we are also reminded in this work that educators are not disposed to keeping track of a very simple but perhaps important question -- how do students themselves perceive their own chances of persisting in school? Nor are educators largely cognizant of (nor has research informed) the processes through which such doubts develop. If a meaningless, simple, innocuous required graduation test can mold confidence in attaining the high school diploma, this confidence is probably a construct worth more investigation.

Other Standards? Finally, can we extend this discussion to today's standards-setting more generally? In one critical perspective, we are not prepared to do so. We do not know enough about the dimensions of standards actually resulting from recent policy legislation to compare particular features with those of the well-established exit test. But from another viewpoint, there appear to be linkages between our findings and the policy analysis agenda for standards setting reforms.

Where these inquiries focus on the potential of reforms to usher kids out of school before graduating, they will face the same "invisibility" we found in the views and reports of educators concerning what is happening to high schoolers. So we should be satisfied with the testimony of system professionals on the topic of standards and school dropouts. To the extent that new standards present more meaningful hurdles than exit tests --

a message from some of our respondents that would probably find agreement among many educators -- our results suggest that their effects on struggling students be examined carefully.

And our work suggests that such examinations might include systematic monitoring of student beliefs about their likelihood of finishing school as well as their propensity to make more final dropout decisions. Keeping touch with the former may lead to secondary, responsive policies -- policies that can equip still-attending youngsters to meet new standards. Awareness of dropout behavior may be an academically interesting outcome of future analysis, but this work may be educationally moot for those who have given up on school.

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TABLE 1

INTERVIEW AND SURVEY SAMPLE
By Type of Respondent, State Graduation Rate, and Community Type

(state grad. rate)	High				Low			
State test directors:	3				3			
(community type)	Urb	Sub	Rur		Urb	Sub	Rur	
District test coordinators:	3	2	1	= 6	3	1	3	= 7
School principals:	4	2	2	= 8	6	2	2	= 10
School counselors:	5	3	3	= 11	6	2	2	= 10
Totals:	12	7	6	= 25	15	5	7	= 27
Students	214	136	77	= 427	128	79	99	= 306

TABLE 2

STUDENT RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION,
"DO TESTS REQUIRED FOR GRADUATION DISCOURAGE SOME STUDENTS FROM STAYING IN HIGH SCHOOL?"
By Age, Grades, High School Track, Grade Repeat, Self-Reported Chance of Dropping Out of School, and Graduation Test Outcome
(Percentages)

STUDENTS:	ALL	AGE:		GRADES:		TRACK:			REPEAT:		DROPCHANCE:	
		16-	17+	HI	LOW	CP	VC	GN	NO	YS	NONE	SOME
Response:												
"YES"	53	55	50	51	61	46	59	61	52	55	52	47
"NO"	19	16	23	20	14	23	24	12	21	15	20	11
"UNSURE"	28	29	27	29	25	31	17	27	27	30	27	22

HI: C+ or better, LOW: C or worse GPA, CP: college prep, VC: vocational, GN: general, REPEAT: ever repeated a grade? DROPCHANCE: self-reported chance of dropping out of school (SOME includes probably not, maybe, probably, definitely will drop out).

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Student Responses By Achievement Level and Test Outcome

	LOW ACHIEVERS (LOW grades) TEST OUTCOME				NON-LOW ACHIEVERS (HI grades) TEST OUTCOME			
	Pass	Subspass	Fail	Notake	Pass	Subspass	Fail	Notake
Response:								
"YES"	61	59	50	65	37	35	52	57
"NO"	21	6	21	13	27	33	10	17
"UNSURE"	18	35	29	22	36	31	38	26

Subspass: fail then pass, Notake: graduation test not taken yet.

TABLE 3

STUDENT RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION,
"DO TESTS REQUIRED FOR GRADUATION DISCOURAGE SOME STUDENTS FROM STAYING IN HIGH SCHOOL?"
By State Graduation Rate and Community Type
(Percentages)

	High Graduation Rate:				Low Graduation Rate:			
Comm. Type:	ALL	URBAN	SUBURBAN	RURAL	ALL	URBAN	SUBURBAN	RURAL
"YES"	57	50	65	52	46	46	40	52
"NO"	19	22	16	24	19	18	23	13
"UNSURE"	24	28	19	23	35	36	37	35

TABLE 4

STUDENT RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION,
"ARE YOU PERSONALLY AWARE OF SOMEONE WHO FAILED A GRADUTATION TEST AND LATER LEFT SCHOOL BECAUSE OF THIS?"
By Age, Grades, High School Track, Grade Repeat,
And Self-Reported Chance of Dropping Out of School
(Percentages)

STUDENTS:	ALL	AGE:		GRADES:		TRACK:			REPEAT:		DROPCHANCE:	
		16-	17+	HI	LOW	CP	VC	GN	NO	YS	NONE	SOME
"YES"	14	15	12	12	22	08	19	22	12	19	12	21
"NO"	69	64	75	72	57	75	60	62	74	53	72	45
"UNSURE"	17	22	13	16	21	17	21	17	14	28	16	24

(columns may not total 100% due to rounding)

TABLE 5

STUDENT RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION, "ARE TESTS REQUIRED FOR GRADUATION A GOOD IDEA?"
By Origin and Test Outcome (Percentages)

Response:	All	Origin					Test Outcome			
		Wt	Bl	Hi	As	NA	Pass	F-P	Fail	None
Yes:	56	52	55	68	75	47	72	58	47	50
No:	20	20	29	18	12	24	15	18	42	21
Not Sure:	24	29	16	13	14	27	13	24	11	28

Wt-White, Bl-Black, Hi-Hispanic, As-Asian, NA-Native American
Pass: first try pass, F-P: failed then passed, Fail: failed test, None: test not taken.

TABLE 6

STUDENT OPINIONS REGARDING TESTS REQUIRED FOR GRADUATION
By Background and Achievement
(Write-ins on an open survey item, by common clusters)

	All		White		Black		Hispn.		Asian		Other		LowACH		Non-LACH	
N:	(736)		(383)		(117)		(88)		(57)		(91)		(159)		(563)	
POSITIVE RESPONSES:	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
ensure kids learned	159	21.6	100	26.1	17	14.5	14	15.9	15	26.3	13	14.3	26	16.4	133	23.6
show strengths and weaknesses	138	18.8	52	13.8	17	14.5	31	35.2	19	33.3	19	20.9	10	6.3	83	14.7
ensure prep for the world, work	94	12.8	49	12.8	10	8.5	14	15.9	13	22.8	8	8.8	5	3.1	42	7.5
show college readiness	49	6.7	14	3.7	6	5.1	16	18.1	9	15.8	4	4.4	22	13.8	13	2.1
motivates kids	12	1.6	8	2.1	3	2.6	0	0.0	1	1.8	0	0.0	3	1.9	8	1.4
other positive responses	27	3.7	11	2.9	8	6.8	3	3.4	1	1.8	4	4.4	6	3.8	21	3.7
Offering One or More Pos Expl:	398*	54.1														
NEGATIVE RESPONSES:	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
school work should suffice	96	13.0	54	14.1	14	12.0	11	12.5	2	3.5	18	19.8	32	20.1	56	9.9
do not measure knowledge	68	9.2	48	12.5	11	9.4	2	2.3	3	5.3	4	4.4	15	9.4	33	5.9
unfair to poor test takers	28	3.7	22	5.7	0	0.0	3	3.4	1	1.8	2	2.2	2	1.3	6	1.1
waste of time	9	1.3	5	1.3	0	0.0	1	1.1	1	1.8	1	1.1	1	0.6	3	0.5
unfair to low achievers	9	1.2	5	1.3	2	1.7	1	1.1	0	0.0	1	1.1	5	3.1	4	0.7
unfair to minorities	5	.6	1	0.3	1	0.9	1	1.1	0	0.0	2	2.2	2	1.3	25	4.4
other negative responses	41	5.7	27	7.0	9	7.7	2	2.3	2	3.5	3	3.3	11	6.9	29	5.2
Offering One or More Neg Expl:	213*	28.9														
Offering No Explanations:	125	17.0														

* Columns reflect multiple responses. Totals reflect numbers of individuals offering one or more responses in each category.

TABLE 7

STUDENT RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION,
"DO GRADUATION TEST FAILERS SUBSEQUENTLY RECEIVE
SUFFICIENT REMEDIAL HELP?"
By Age, High School Track, Origin, and State Graduation Rate
(Percentages)

	AGE		TRACK			ORIGIN					GRAD RATE:	
	UF	LF	CD	VC	GN	WH	BL	HI	AS	OT	HI	LO
N:	328	315	336	62	216	348	81	87	52	67	445	276
"YES"	57	51	56	53	51	46	65	68	75	49	54	53
"NO"	18	9	10	21	19	15	15	8	8	12	15	12
"UNSURE"	25	41	34	26	31	39	20	24	17	39	31	35

UF: grades 11 and 12, LF: grades 9 and 10, WH: white, BL: black
HI: Hispanic AS: Asian, OT: other race, GRAD RATE: state graduation rate -- two high and two low states included in sample.

TABLE 8

STUDENT RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION,
"DO GRADUATION TEST FAILERS SUBSEQUENTLY RECEIVE
SUFFICIENT REMEDIAL HELP?"
By School Performance Indicators: Test Outcomes, Grades,
and Self-Reported Chance of Graduating
(Percentages)

	TEST OUTCOME				GRADES:		GRADCHANCE:		
	Pass	Subspass	Fail	Notake	HI	LOW	Def	Prob	Maybe
N:	155	68	36	415	501	138	634	68	34
"YES"	59	63	54	51	54	52	54	56	50
"NO"	17	9	31	11	11	23	13	14	18
"UNSURE"	24	29	14	39	35	26	33	31	32

TABLE 9

SELF REPORTED OUTCOMES ON REQUIRED GRADUATION TESTS
By Origin (Percentages)

OUTCOME:	STUDENT ORIGIN:					
N:	ALL (674)	WHITE (352)	BLACK (110)	HISPA (86)	ASIAN (53)	NAT.AM. (39)
PASSED FIRST TRY	23	22	27	17	40	13
SUBSEQUENT PASS	10	4	8	27	25	10
FAIL	5	4	7	14	0	3
NOT TAKEN	62	71	57	42	36	74
Percent Failing At Least Once (of those reporting taking the test)	39	26	36	71	38	50

TABLE 10

DESCRIPTION OF STUDENT SAMPLES
USED IN REGRESSIONS
Percentages or Means and Standard Deviations

	(1) All Students N=736	(2) Students Reporting Test Experience N=264	(3) Subset of Group (2) With Complete Data N=223
Age	15.34 (1.26)	15.91 (1.30)	15.88 (1.25)
Grade	10.11 (1.07)	10.56 (1.04)	10.58 (1.01)
SES (5 point)	3.07 (1.35)	2.96 (1.36)	2.93 (1.38)
Dropout peers? (3 point)	1.43 (0.72)	1.50 (0.77)	1.48 (0.76)
Grades (9 pt, 9=0 GPA)	3.38 (1.63)	3.53 (1.65)	3.48 (1.69)
Percent:			
Repeat	18	22	21
Black	16	16	17
Hispanic	12	19	15
Voc. trac	9	13	13
Gen. trac	35	36	36
Failed test	05	14	13
Subseq pass	10	27	24
Might drop	14	13	11

Note: Groups (1) and (2) were used to estimate the model. Column (3) is shown to illustrate certain consequences of missing data in the smaller group (2). Column (3) data are based on students for whom we had complete information on variables included in the model.

TABLE 11

SELF-REPORTED CHANCES OF DROPPING OUT OF SCHOOL:
ESTIMATION OF A LINEAR MODEL
OLS Regression Coefficients and t-statistics

DEPENDENT VARIABLE: SELF-REPORTED CHANCE THAT STUDENT WILL DROP OUT OF HIGH SCHOOL WITHOUT A DIPLOMA

SAMPLE:	All Students N=736		Students Aware of Having Taken Competency Test N=265	
Variable	b	t	b	t
Background:				
SES	-.032	(-2.11)*	-.057	(-2.19)*
BLACK	-.147	(-2.54)*	-.198	(-1.92)
HISPANIC	.021	(0.24)	-.164	(-1.27)
School Context:				
ENROLLMENT	-.001	(-0.75)	.001	(0.61)
TRACK (more general)	.061	(2.39)*	.045	(1.10)
DROPOUT PEERS?	.100	(3.42)**	.068	(1.40)
School Performance:				
GRADES (neg. scale)	.075	(4.81)**	.076	(2.89)**
REPEATED A GRADE?	.161	(2.80)*	.182	(1.82)
Comp. Test Result:				
FAILED	.889	(3.24)**	.913	(3.09)**
FAILED, THEN PASSED	.027	(0.37)	.017	(0.19)
Interactions				
FAIL TEST x HISPANIC	.634	(2.40)*	.717	(2.47)*
FAIL TEST x BLACK	-.355	(-1.55)	-.322	(-1.91)
FAIL TEST x POOR GRADES	-.182	(-3.05)**	-.170	(-2.58)*
FAIL TEST x REPEAT	-.211	(-1.01)	-.266	(-1.15)
R SQUARE	.253		.276	
F (DF)	12.11**	(14, 502)	4.85**	(14, 178)

significance: * p<.05; ** p<.01

Appendix A

STUDY OF STANDARDS AND SCHOOL DROPOUTS
UCLA *** CRESST

Original Candidate States for Interviews,
With Selected Statistics/Descriptors

Note: This table displays published information and has not been updated to reflect field responses.

State:	1984 Grad. Rate:	First Class Tested:	Who Sets Std?	Grades Tested
NY	.62	1979	State	8-12
FL	.62	1983	St/local	8,11
CA	.63	1979	St/local	10 +
AZ	.65	1976	St/Local	8,12
NV	.66	1982	State	9,11
NC	.69	1980	State	9,11
DE	.71	1981	State	11
VA	.75	1981	St/local	10-12
UT	.79	1980	St/local	11,12
VT	.83	1981	State	10-12

Appendix B

STUDY OF STANDARDS AND SCHOOL DROPOUTS

James S. Catterall

Master Question List for Interviews

(State testing coordinators and district testing coordinators were asked all questions shown in this listing. School principals and school counselors were asked questions beginning with number 14.)

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11. Describe the development of the test.

12. Can you send information on the test program, including student performance statistics?

13. Your state's graduation test was effective with which graduating class?

14. Describe the format and logistics of the test: (separate parts? topics? time to write? Who grades? When are results given to students?)

15. When is the test first administered:

16. Describe follow-up administrations for failers:

(Interviewer: Advise respondent that we are much more interested in how things work than in numbers, but ask, "Do you keep information such as the following?")

17. What do you know about success/failure patterns?

Especially by cumulative academic performance?
race/ethnicity?

18. Do you have statistical reports that we might obtain?

19. What is your sense of student views on grad test?:

a. How do kids seem to react to grad test?

b. Any particular reactions of High Achievers?

c. Any particular reactions of Low Achievers?

110. How do parents seem to react to the graduation test?

111. a. Do you have any specific concerns regarding low achievers?

and the graduation test?

b. Do you sense any hesitation on the part of low-achievers to sit for test?

c. Do you sense unwillingness on the part of students to retake the test if failed?

d. What are your opinions regarding the notion that a graduation test may encourage some students to drop out of school?

112. Describe remediation practices for students who fail the test:

113. What is your general impression of dropout incidence/ patterns over the past 5 years? (state; district; school; as apply)

114. How would you describe the overall impact of the graduation test program on your schools?

115. Has the graduation test influenced high school curricula over the years? How?

116. In addition to what we have talked about, do you have any other impressions of the graduation test to offer?

Appendix C

C•R•E•S•S•T

28. S: ___	29. P: ___	32. E:
30. G: ___	31. C: ___	

NATIONAL SURVEY OF STUDENT EXPERIENCES WITH GRADUATION TESTS

Center for Research on Educational Standards and Student Testing
University of California at Los Angeles

TO THE STUDENT: This brief survey asks you a number of questions about standardized tests that your school administers. We are particularly interested in tests that may be required before you can receive a high school diploma, sometimes called graduation tests.

PLEASE DO NOT IDENTIFY YOURSELF ON THIS SURVEY. All responses will be confidential. Your school will receive only summary reports of the results of this study. Please answer each question to the best of your ability. If you do not wish to participate, you do not have to.

I. Please Tell Us About Yourself:

1. Age___ 2. Sex___ 3. Grade___

4. Family Origin:

Caucasian	___ (1)
Black	___ (2)
Hispanic	___ (3)
Asian	___ (4)
Native Amer.	___ (5)
Other	___ (6)

Highest education level of:

5. Mother		6. Father
___	some high school	___ (1)
___	HS graduate	___ (2)
___	some college	___ (3)
___	college grad.	___ (4)
___	postgraduate	___ (5)

II. Please Tell Us About Your School Experiences:

7. From 7th Grade until now, what best describes your academic class grades?

Mostly:	A's	___ (1)
	A's and B's	___ (2)
	B's	___ (3)
	B's and C's	___ (4)
	C's	___ (5)
	C's and D's	___ (6)
	D's	___ (7)
	D's and F's	___ (8)
	F's	___ (9)

8. What best describes your high school courses?

college prep	___ (1)
vocational	___ (2)
general	___ (3)
other	___ (4)
(describe:_____)	

10. Have you ever repeated a grade? yes__(1) no__(2)

11. Some students leave high school without graduating. How would you describe your chances of finishing high school?

Definitely yes	___
Probably	___
Maybe	___
Probably not	___
Definitely not	___

12. If there is some chance that you will not graduate, briefly explain why you might not:_____
_____
_____
_____

III. Please Tell Us About Your School's Graduation Test or Tests.

13. Will you have to pass a particular test in order to graduate?
Yes ___ (1) No ___ (2) Not sure ___ (3)

14. If yes, do you think that this is a good idea?
Yes ___ (1) No ___ (2) Not Sure ___ (3)

15. If you think a graduation test is a good or bad idea, explain why:
_____
_____

16. If you must pass a test to graduate from your current school, what best describes your experience with this test:

Passed on first try ___(1) Passed on later try ___(2)
Tried but have not passed ___(3) Have not taken yet ___(4)

If you have taken all or part of a graduation test, indicate whether you agree with the following:

	Yes (1)	No (2)	Not Sure (3)
17. The test seems to cover things I have studied in my high school classes:	—	—	—
18. The test seems to cover things I knew before entering high school:	—	—	—
19. The test seems to cover things that are not covered specifically in school at all:	—	—	—
20. We spent a lot of class time preparing for the test before taking it for the first time:	—	—	—

IV. Please Indicate Whether You Agree With These Statements:

	Yes	No	Not Sure
21. Tests required for graduation are very easy:	—	—	—
22. Tests required for graduation are very hard:	—	—	—
23. If a student fails all or part of a graduation test, he is likely to get needed help for the next try:	—	—	—
24. Tests required for graduation may discourage some students from staying in high school:	—	—	—
25. I am personally aware of someone who failed a graduation test and later left school because of this:	—	—	—
26. My school has raised graduation requirements in the past three years:	—	—	—

27. If yes, what in particular has changed: _____
_____
_____

V. Is There Anything Else You Would Like To Say About High School Graduation Tests? Please Write Below: